

MASSAGE IN ANTIQUITY

and

Its Practice in Ancient Greece and Rome

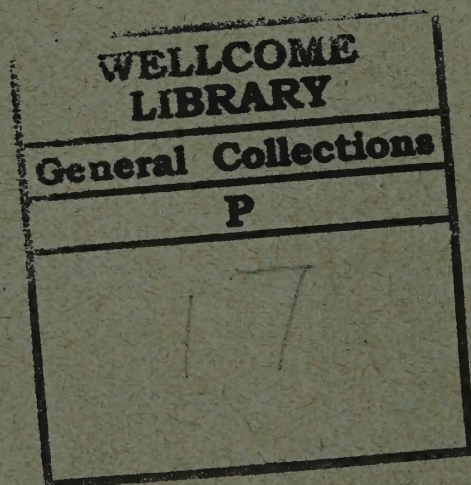
by

C. J. S. THOMPSON, M.B.E.

Curator of the Wellcome Historical Museum.

*[Reprinted by permission from 'The Journal of the Chartered Society of
Massage and Medical Gymnastics.']*

WELLCOME HISTORICAL MEDICAL MUSEUM
LONDON, 1923



22501350935

Massage in Antiquity

And Its Practice in Ancient Greece and Rome.

By C. J. S. THOMPSON, M.B.E., *Curator of the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum.*

THE history of massage goes back to a period of considerable antiquity, and it is difficult to give any approximate date or to identify the people by whom it was first practised. The idea of manipulating the muscles of the body with the hand probably had its origin in the East, and was known centuries before the Christian era. In China, Japan and India there is evidence that massage was practised from a very early period in order to give suppleness to the muscles, as well as to stimulate their action.

It appears to have been carried on as an auxiliary to the bath, and in the Far East the art seems to have been generally cultivated by the blind, who were called by the Japanese *ammasau*. In Japan there are some very interesting ancient carvings in ivory and wood, illustrating the blind masseur at work.

One of the most remarkable representations showing massage in operation is in a stone relief in the temple of Boro Budur in Central Java. This extraordinary building or reliquary is said to have been erected about 850 A.D. to contain the relics of some holy personage, probably Gautama Buddha.

The structure is decorated with numerous sculptured panels in relief, mainly illustrating the life of Buddha, and among these is one showing a man massaging the thigh and upper part of the leg of the Lord Buddha, who is reclining on a couch. The sculpture is remarkable, not only from an artistic point of view, but also for the skill with which the figures have been carved.

From the Far East the practice of massage spread to Europe, and as early as 300 B.C. it is believed to have been practised by the Greeks, and many representations depicting

the masseur at work are to be found on their decorated vases.

Asklepiades of Bithynia, who flourished about 156-128 B.C., was one of the first Greek physicians to recommend massage as a therapeutic agent, although before his time it was probably employed by the Greeks in connection with the gymnasia.

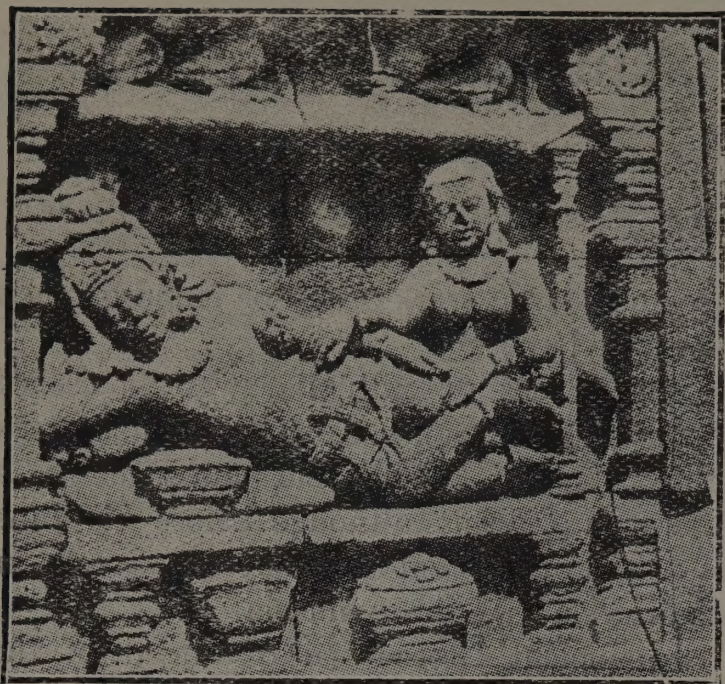
In ancient Greece the treatment of the body by massage was generally practised after the use of the bath or the gymnasium, and was carried out by four classes of practitioners who were called the *unctores*, the *alipili*, the *aliptes* and the *tractatores*.

The *unctores*, who were slaves, were employed in attending to the different wants of the bathers. They also supplied frictions in the baths, as well as massage and unguents. According to some historians, these slaves were a kind of social parasite who were delighted to turn their hand to anything and were only too pleased to render their services in return for a good meal.

The *alipili* were men of the same class, whose duty it was, if required, to scrape the hair from different parts of the body, and particularly from under the arm-pits.

The actual masseurs were called *tractatores* and were trained operators. It was their duty to rub and manipulate the body and limbs with their hands, so as to render the joints more supple and to increase the circulation. They made no use of oil or unguents but worked with their hands dry. They do not appear to have practised at the baths or palestræ to any great extent; they were called in, however, during the course of feasts, and there are representations of them administering frictions and applying their perfumed unguents to those taking part.

Massage in Antiquity



[Copyright.]

MASSEUR OPERATING ON GAUTAMA BUDDHA.

From a stone relief in the Temple of Boro Budur in Java.
Reproduced by kind permission of Geo. P. Lewis, Esq.

Women, then as now, were adepts at this form of treatment, on account of their light touch and supple fingers, and they were known as *tractatrices*.

The class known as *alipites* had, in the performance of their duties, not only to be proficient at massage, but also well versed in the application of unguents and oils. They were skilled operators, and it was part of their duty to direct their patients to breathe in such a manner while they were anointing them, that it should help the absorption of the fats into the skin. They no doubt obtained from experience a practical knowledge of the anatomy of the body, and were able to advise those who underwent their treatment as to the best methods to employ in order to preserve or increase their strength.

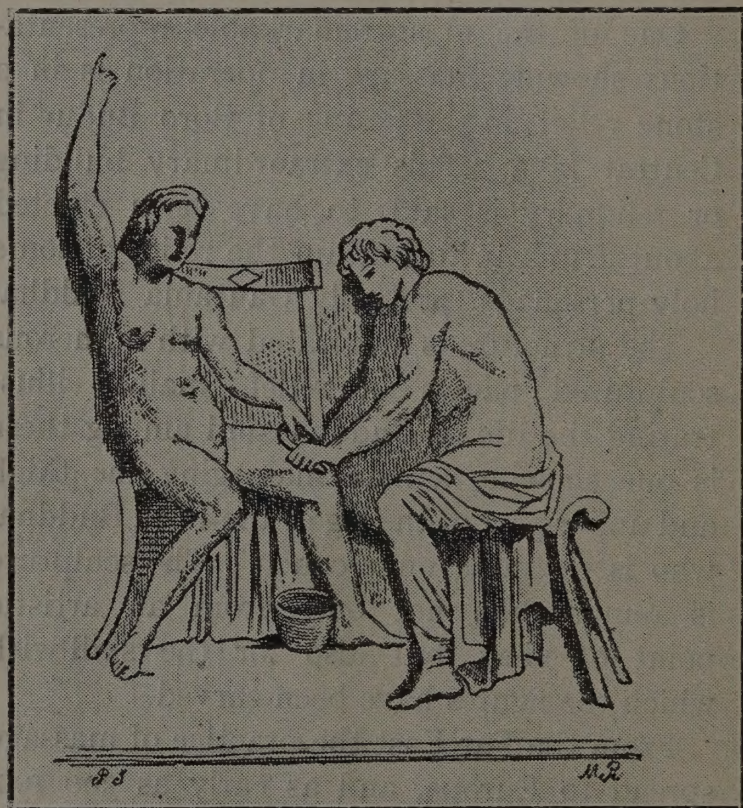
They supervised the training of the athletes, attending especially to their diet, and, in fact, performed the office of the trainer to-day.

The value of massage and inunction by the gymnasts of Ancient Greece, who performed such remarkable feats of endurance, is referred to by Lucian in a dialogue where Solon explains the reason for their use.

He states, that it caused the skin to become more supple, gave more elasticity to the muscles, and that the application of the oil to the skin made it more slippery and more difficult for combatants to seize each other. In order that the combatants might not slip away without a struggle when they were at grips with one another, dust or fine sand was sprinkled on the muscles after they had been rubbed. This is said to have been done also to prevent excessive perspiration and give them more endurance.

After performing their various feats or combats in the arena, treatment was sometimes given during the intervals, unless the combatants actually performed these operations for each other, as depicted on Greek pottery, and in sculptures. There is a jar in the Gregorian Museum on which is a representation of an operator in the act of rubbing a combatant, who is holding a phial from which the oil is to be applied to the body.

From inscriptions on various Greek records we gather that emperors, nobles and those of the more wealthy classes, kept their own



AN ALIPTE OPERATING AFTER THE BATH.

From a Roman bas-relief. Circa A.D. 150.

Massage in Antiquity

private masseurs on the staff of their palaces or households.

The gymnasia in the large cities had attached to them special rooms, or sometimes even buildings, which were most beautifully equipped and furnished with couches, where those who were about to take part in the games were prepared for the contest by the attendants, and it was here that the *aliptes* and *tractatores* operated.

Sprengel states, that a gymnasium was frequently attached to the Greek temples of healing, where chronic cases of illness could be treated by a course of baths, exercises and massage.

The chief instrument used by the *aliptes* was the strigil, which was generally fashioned of bronze and shaped somewhat like a sickle, with a concave blade and handle, the whole about 12 inches long. These instruments, which are often seen in representations of ancient baths depending from the wall, were in common use for scraping the oil and perspiration from the limbs after the games, and before the body was massaged or rubbed with a perfumed unguent.

Persons of position probably kept their own strigils at the baths, just as a man will keep his own razor at a hairdresser's shop to-day. Some of the specimens extant have finely ornamented handles, and others are stamped with the names of the owners. Several strigils of this description are in the section of Hygiene at the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum.

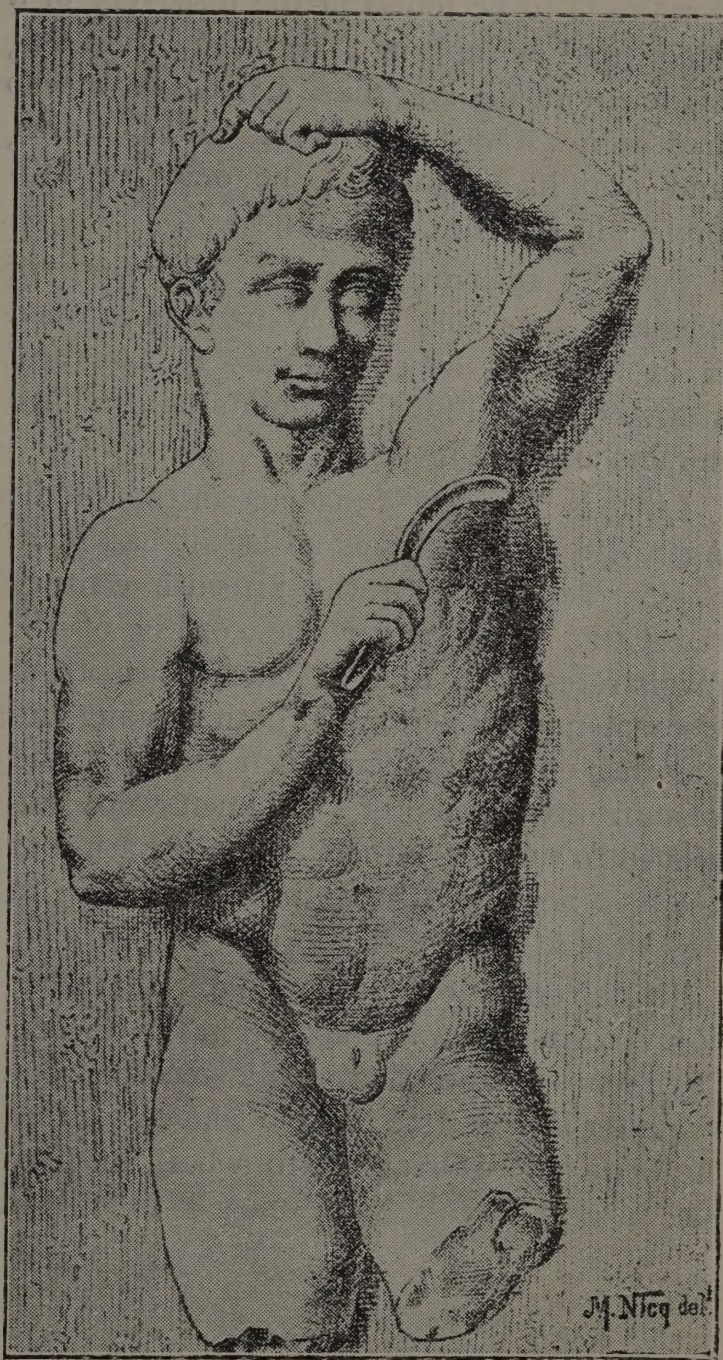
As a rule, no one left the baths without being thus treated and rubbed by the *aliptes*, and the operation became such a habit with the Romans, that Cicero is recorded to have observed, that "a man has a doctor to preserve his life and an *alipste* to give him strength and vigour."

The Romans adopted these customs from the Greeks and there are many allusions in the works of authors at the time of the Roman Empire to massage and similar operations. Under the Empire the profes-

sion of *alipste* and *tractator* became a most elevated one, ranking with certain types of medical practitioners, and it is to one of their number, Herodicus of Selymbria, that Pliny attributes the discovery of the value of friction and unguents as therapeutic agents.

Both men and women undertook the duties of *aliptes*, and a painting on a tomb near Rome in the Appian Way, represents a woman holding a strigil for scraping the body.

Cicero, in alluding to the *aliptes*, says that the medical practitioner had the foundation



A YOUTH USING A STRIGIL.

From a Greco-Roman bas-relief. Circa A.D. 100.

Massage in Antiquity

of health for his object, while the *alipste* dealt with the appearance and outward parts of the body. "Since the time of Alexander," says another historian, "people have known of these auxiliaries of medicine, who have been taught to malaxate the joints and loosen the fingers of their patients," and another allusion to the masseur is made by a poet who speaks of him as "manipulating the body with nimble movement and luxating the muscles with knowing hand."

A proof of the high esteem in which the profession was held in the later days of the Empire is to be found in the discovery of a sculptured epitaph in Rome some time ago, commemorating Xanthus, a freed slave, who had been *tractator* to Tiberius and Claudius, and who had also held the office of sub-prefect in the Alexandrian fleet.

Coulon, referring to the operation of massage, says that the Romans performed it in order to lessen fatigue, remove any stiffness of the limbs and joints, and relieve sprains and echymosis.

Little is recorded of massage in the Middle Ages, and apparently, as an art, it had practically died out. In the fifteenth century the baths came under the control of the magistrates or guilds. Attached to them were men who performed both cupping and bleeding on the bathers when required, and certain attendants or bondmen were employed to rub the bathers after the bath, but there is no record that these men were in any way skilled.

In Eastern Europe it is probable that some form of massage was practised in the oriental bath-houses, and there is a record by a traveller in Palestine in 1450 who states that he went before breakfast to a bath in Jerusalem and drank some new wine. "In



[Copyright.]
BLIND JAPANESE MASSEUR OPERATING
ON A PATIENT.

From an ancient ivory carving.

the bath," he continues, "they cudgelled and throttled us. They break one's arms across his back and behind his head, then laying him flat, jump upon his back. It is almost murder."

It is probable that in the Turkish baths some rough form of treatment survived throughout the Middle Ages to recent times, but there is little or no record of the practice. It was not until the latter quarter of the nineteenth century that a revival in massage treatment took place. Since then, great advances have been made in Western Europe, and as is now well-known, it has again taken the position of a valuable auxiliary to medical treatment.

